

One of the vacant businesses on Spafford Avenue in the once thriving Victorian Village on Tuesday.

Victorian Village now mostly vacancies

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restaurants that have opened in recent years.

Downtown promoters think Victorian Village still has a rosy future — either in an altered commercial state or converted back to residential use. For now, however, it resembles a ghost town.

"I get teary-eyed thinking about the decline," said Gloria Mercer, whose novelty store, Robin's Nest, has been at four locations in Victorian Village in 14 years.

She started out selling crafts. These days, Beanie Babies and athletic trading cards dominate the stock in her store on Longwood Street, in what used to be the heart of the village, a place where antiques, ethnic imports and tea rooms rubbed elbows with candy shops and hot dog stands.

"We could have been another Long Grove," said Mercer, referring to the picturesque Chicago suburb known for its trendy boutiques and eateries.

Lack of parking, confusing one-way streets and the lure of suburban-like mall space on the booming far east side surely contributed to its demise.

But just where Victorian Village went wrong depends on whom you ask.

Darryl Johnson purchased nearby Sundberg funeral parlor with Matsakis in 1986. He speculates an inability to establish repeat business didn't bode well for Victorian Village when its appeal as a tourist attraction waned.

"Rockford alone couldn't keep the shops going," Johnson said. "It was a nice idea, and it flourished for

a little while. But there's hardly anything left now."

Tourism officials quit promoting Victorian Village four or five years ago, when the number of stores began to thin out and shopkeepers adopted irregular hours and low-brow inventory, said Wendy Perks Fisher, president and CEO of the Rockford Area Convention and Visitors Bureau.

"They lost critical mass," she said. "It was a real bootstrap operation, and the original visionaries moved on."

Victorian Village "should be riding on the coattails" of downtown's newfound prosperity, Fisher said, but instead has become "a neighborhood in jeopardy."

Mercer blames civic leaders, saying they turned their backs on Victorian Village and let a community asset slip through their fingers.

Worse, she claims, City Hall put up roadblocks.

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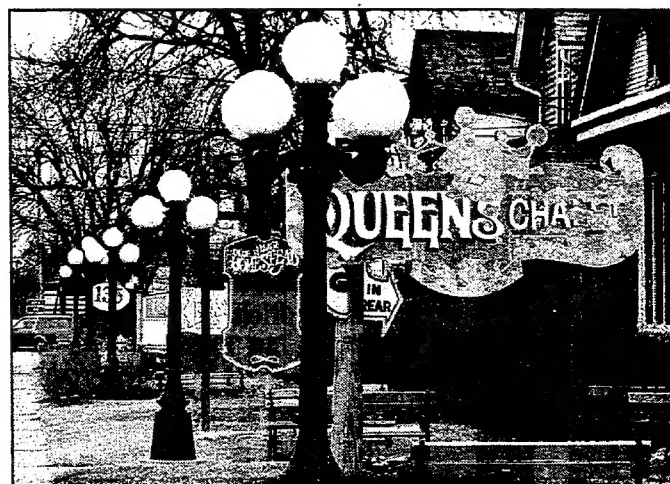
— Darryl Johnson

head traffic engineer, Steve Ernst, contends most people entered Victorian Village from East State. Too, he points out, the city repaved Longwood in 1995 as part of the project to reduce collisions where Longwood and Ninth merge.

At that point, Victorian Village



Gloria Mercer, owner of the Robin's Nest in Victorian Village, takes a stroll through her once bustling neighborhood where only three businesses remain. She is an original merchant and has hopes for its revival.



Old signs line the properties of Victorian Village on Saturday up Longwood Street. The area has declined from its popularity 10 years ago.

already was on the skids.

Store owners recognized business beginning to erode as early as 1989, when they formed an association, charged dues and hired an oversight manager.

Within a year, the East State Street Antiques Mall several miles east tripled its space to 60,000 feet. What began with a handful of vendors displaying items on card tables has evolved into 320 dealers under two roofs.

The mall offered a distinct advantage over Victorian Village.

Cashiers furnished by the mall owner allowed dealers to devote time to what they loved best — scrounging for new merchandise. Having to be on hand to ring up each sale was more than budding entrepreneurs in Victorian Village bargained for.

"They could only do it for so long before they said, 'It's been fun. But

maybe it's time to pack it up,'" said Brian Gauerke, whose parents played pivotal roles in coalescing the theme.

Although a few shops dated to the late 1970s, Donna and Eugene Gauerke gave the neighborhood an enormous boost when they converted whole blocks of two-flat apartment houses they rented along Longwood and Ninth. They knocked out walls, tore out kitchens, erected a rooftop billboard and wired Longwood for replica Victorian-era street lamps.

In 1985, then-Mayor John McNamara presided over the official ribbon cutting.

Eight months ago, the Gauerke family sold the buildings to a single buyer. The new owner could not be reached for comment.

"I can't say anything specifically went wrong," said Gauerke, an electrician. "You hear of people who are

scared to go west of 20th Street. I think that impression (of high crime) had something to do with it."

Mercer said high rents also became a factor. She manages to hang on by living in the back rooms of her first-floor rental.

Same goes for Maria Martinez, who bought the house next door in 1997. Martinez, her husband and granddaughter live on the second floor and run a bridal shop downstairs. Disappointed with slow sales, they plan to sell.

Roz Okeke, who closed her African clothing and gift shop on Spafford Avenue in February 1998, said the emergence of what police termed a "bawdy house" in 1997 spelled the end.

Unable to substantiate claims of prostitution and drug peddling, city officials eventually shut down Jacuzzi Resort on code violations, including the dumping of bath

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"I don't think reputable people wanted to come around there anymore. People thought it was low-class."

Victoria's Bed and Breakfast also bit the dust last year.

Marty Lewis said he quit taking reservations in June because he no longer could find dependable people to run the exclusive, mansion-turned-inn on Sixth Street. Though his business remained strong even as the popularity of Victorian Village ebbed, his guests missed browsing in the shops.

"It was a fad," Lewis said. "I think Victorian Village is washed up for good."

A future commercial 'gateway' to downtown?

■ The next phase: Local officials see potential for Victorian Village as a locale for offices and apartments.

By MARK BONNE
Rockford Register Star

ROCKFORD — Larry Morrissey plans to live and work under the same roof, as soon as his father's realty company finishes renovating the old Pioneer Life insurance building on Wyman Street.

He sees Victorian Village heading in the same direction, toward a combination of office and residential space. "They create a synergy together," said Morrissey, an attorney and president of River District, the neighborhood group that promotes the inner city.

"Having people live in the area helps fight the image that it's unsafe. It's a really neat lifestyle we can offer downtown" — and a smart business move, Morrissey contends. "You hedge your bets a little bit. You spread your risk out."

Wendy Perks Fisher, president and CEO of the Rockford Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, said she thinks Victorian Village remains viable as a commercial "gateway" to downtown.

Other observers think the turn-of-the-century homes could be transformed into a cluster of bed-and-breakfasts, feeding on the need for downtown hotel space.

But most downtown advocates agree Victorian Village's days as a retail district are over.

"I'm not sure having McDonald's and Wendy's at the entrance is very Victorian," city planner and historian Ginny Gregory said. "I would say a more likely scenario would be apartments."

Property developer Chandler Anderson, whose downtown renovation projects include Bacchus Wine Bar and homes in Haight Village, said there is growing demand for upscale urban living quarters.

"If any downtown revitalization is going to happen, it will be driven by young, upwardly mobile residents who have disposable income to support businesses downtown," he said. "Any city that has recaptured its downtown has captured that group."

On the flip side, Gloria Mercer said she and another of Victorian Village's three remaining store owners have discussed the idea of launching a flea market that would operate outdoors on summer weekends.

"It will never go back to the good old days of classy shops," she said. "Rockford loves to buy cheap."

United buyout alters Sundstrand's stock appeal; bigger gains possible

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segment. And because of that, the value of its stock often follows the fortunes of companies such as airplane giant Boeing Co., she said.

Kelly Schmidt, manager of corporate investor relations for Sundstrand, said more attention often is paid to bigger companies.

"Sundstrand believes this is a good thing for Sundstrand shareholders, or (the buyout) would not have been done," she said.

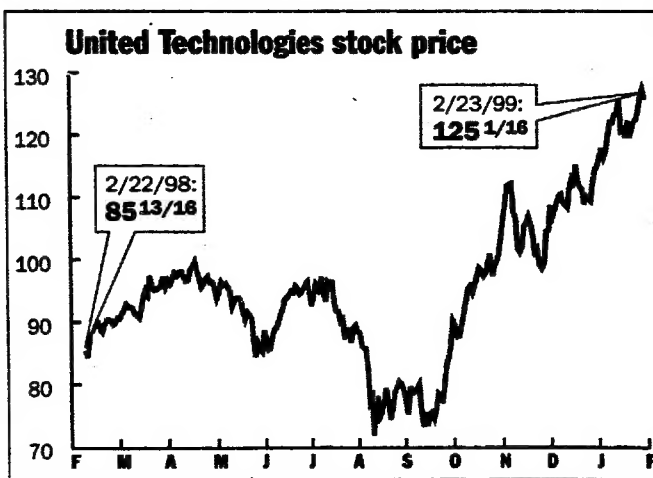
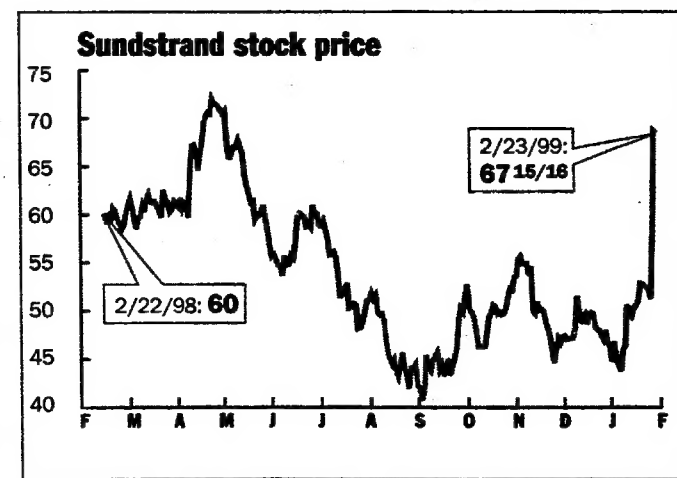
Many of the company's workers participate in the 401(k) retirement plan, she said, which enables employees to invest in Sundstrand stock as well as in the stocks of other companies through different funds.

Joe Reynolds, owner of Financial Designs, a Rockford financial planning firm, said employees will want to consider the tax consequences of their investments being transferred into United Technologies stock.

Toppe agreed and said that employees also should consider how having United Technologies stock fits in with any other stock holdings.

"Let's say if you already own GE stock, and GE is diversified, you may have wanted Sundstrand for a specific focus," she said. "But maybe (United Technologies) wouldn't be appropriate in your portfolio now."

Shareholders also may realize greater dividends. Sundstrand's has been 68 cents a share vs. United Technologies' \$1.44.



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